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Conservator appointed to restore Chinese porcelain vases

Three monumental Chinese porcelain vases damaged whilst on display at The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, in January are entering the long and complex process of conservation at the hands of a leading ceramic conservator. Penny Bendall, of Bendall Ceramic Conservation based in Suffolk, trained at West Dean College and holds a Royal Warrant. For the past 18 years she has worked on major oriental ceramics collections around the world including The Royal Collection, Burghley House, Eskenazi in London and Charlottenburg Palace in Berlin.

The three Chinese vases are Qing Dynasty, reign of Kangxi (1662-1722) and date from the late 17th or early 18th century. From a set of five vases which entered the collections in 1948, they had been displayed for decades - in line with the Fitzwilliam's distinctive house style and without incident - on a recessed window sill on an imposing 1930s marble staircase and enjoyed by the Museum's 300,000 visitors a year.

Painted in enamels in the *famille verte* palette with traces of gilding, the vases are decorated with peonies and other flowering plants, phoenixes, pheasants, butterflies and insects. Two vases are of 'yan yan' shape (height 71 and 72.5 cm) and one is a heavy baluster jar with cover (height 80 cm) which weighed about 45 kg and could not be lifted single-handed by a curator. On display, the feet of the two smaller flanking vases had been secured to blocks which, in turn, were securely fixed to the window sill.

The impact that toppled the vases resulted in pieces of porcelain being distributed over a wide area of the staircase landing and no less than 28 steps. After careful evaluation of the damage, the site of the accident was photographed and the vases systematically documented and removed over a period of two and a half days. The pieces were then placed in 24 large lined trays, carefully labelled and cross-referenced with the location from which they were retrieved.

Museum staff were confident at an early stage that the vases could be restored and sought advice from experienced oriental ceramic conservators. Following careful evaluation of the damage, Penny Bendall has been appointed to carry out the conservation work and her preliminary reassembly of the vases has revealed the likelihood of a successful outcome. Penny said "This is a fantastic opportunity to demonstrate how ceramic conservation techniques have improved in recent years due to the introduction of modern materials. Being very familiar with hard paste porcelain, I can foresee no major problems and am looking forward enormously to working on the vases over the coming months and getting them back on display at the Fitzwilliam so that visitors may once again enjoy these beautiful objects."

Fitzwilliam Museum Director Duncan Robinson said "We are delighted at such a positive prognosis for the conservation of the vases and have every confidence that their eventual return to public display in the Fitzwilliam is now a welcome reality."

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.../Further information and images

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NOTES FOR EDITORS

The Fitzwilliam Museum

The Fitzwilliam Museum houses the University of Cambridge's art collection and is a public museum and art gallery with an international reputation. More than half a million objects and works of art are held in five curatorial departments: Antiquities, Applied Arts, Coins and Medals, Manuscripts and Printed Books and Paintings, Drawings and Prints. The Fitzwilliam's treasures range from Ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman antiquities to the arts of the 21st century and include masterpieces by Titian, Canaletto, Stubbs, Constable, Monet, Renoir and Picasso, one of the world's foremost Rembrandt print collections, Handel music manuscripts and the famous Fitzwilliam Virginal Book, one of the most significant collections of Korean ceramics outside South-East Asia, medieval illuminated manuscripts and outstanding collections of pottery, porcelain and medieval coins. The Fitzwilliam Museum's stewardship and management of its collections meet the highest national standards as affirmed by full accreditation from the Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA).

The Fitzwilliam Museum attracts around 300,000 visitors a year. It is open Tuesday to Saturday, 10.00 am to 5.00 pm, Sundays and Bank Holidays, 12.00 noon to 5.00 pm; closed Mondays. Admission to the permanent collections and to temporary exhibitions is free.

Website: www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk

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